

Libertarian Social Policy

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
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Social policy is a finer name for state-mandated wealth redistribution (“social justice”) or legislation of morality and behavior modification schemes. Libertarianism has no social policy, even though some might misguidedly classify its promotion of individual liberty, free markets, and the protection of fundamental rights as social policies. Libertarianism supports the “natural” rights to life, liberty, and property, very limited government, freedom of speech and religion, and a capitalist economy unbridled by regulation. On a local level, libertarians rely on private contracting (i.e., restrictive covenants), the common law, and time-honored customs to form the rules that guide social interaction. Libertarianism’s underlying basis is the *principle of non-aggression* against any innocent human being by both individuals and governments.

Libertarians oppose proactive policies instituted by states: universal health care, public schools, the war on drugs, gun control, welfare and Social Security, environmentalist social policies, progressive income taxation, the Federal Reserve System, the draft (slavery), and aggressive wars—just to name a few policies (see <http://www.lp.org/issues/issues.shtml>). The Libertarian Party website states: “The Libertarian way is a logically consistent approach to politics based on the moral principle of self-ownership. Each individual has the right to control his or her own body, action, speech, and property. Government’s only role is to help individuals defend themselves from force and fraud.”

Social policy is simply not on libertarianism’s approved list. Nor does personal preference translate into social policy. The fact that some libertarians are drug abusers and sodomites does not mean that libertarianism champions drug abuse or sodomy as social policy. The personal philosophies espoused by eccentric libertarians (those with hedonistic or immoral lifestyles in particular) should be not confused with ideal or core libertarianism. For instance, to pro-life libertarians the non-aggression principle means that the pro-life position is the *only* consistently libertarian one (visit Libertarians for Life at <http://www.L4L.org>), even though 60% of libertarians favor abortion rights. Regrettably, many libertarians are inconsistent on the pro-life issue—just as the libertarian Thomas Jefferson was inconsistent on the slavery issue. Yet such personal inconsistency does not make libertarianism inconsistent.

Moreover, just because something is sinful does not mean it should be illegal. Libertarians do not seek to use the state to enforce morality or change the moral conduct of citizens. Libertarians rely on acts of civil society (what economists refer to as “market-based” phenomenon) such as Gospel preaching to change behavioral preferences rather than the state. Libertarians hold that government should protect us from predators so that our fundamental rights are preserved. Only then is there an overlap with commandments of God like “You shall not murder”, “You shall not steal”, and “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exodus 20:13, 15-16).

From a libertarian perspective, government does not enforce these laws because God says to do so. Instead, the ideal of government upholding fundamental rights by protecting people from predators is seen as the best means of promoting a civil society under *pluralism*. The Constitution is safeguarded by applying a strict or “non-living” interpretive rule. Prosperity, social cooperation, ingenuity, and relative peace are the result. For many Christians, the ideals of libertarianism are compatible with the Bible.

Activist, principled Christians will fall into one of two groups: aptly represented by the Constitution Party and the pro-life wing of the Libertarian Party. The former camp tends to be more comfortable with a theonomic public policy theology; the latter camp with a liberty of conscience theology.¹ The former tend to be Presbyterians and the latter Baptists, although the denominational lines are not that sharp in terms of public policy theology today. (Interestingly, while no Baptists signed the Constitution they

¹ Although some variation will occur within each camp, a consistently-thinking Christian will inevitably land in one of the two camps once he decides what the nature of the state is and what its purpose is in the world. But no one should make the mistake of concluding that libertarianism fosters proactive social policies. And activist, liberty-minded Christians should express tolerance and an open ear to the issues raised by other activist Christians—especially after they understand the presuppositions of the two camps.

were keenly interested in the Bill of Rights.) A Christian's public policy theology will drive him to one camp or the other if he is consistent.

For example, if a Christian believes that the state is potentially good, ordained by God (along with the church and the family) to promote righteous living and help advance the kingdom of God through the dominion mandate (Genesis 1:27), he will land in the Constitution Party camp. Alternatively, if a Christian believes that the state is by nature evil, only ordained by God in the same way that Satan is ordained by God, he will land in the pro-life libertarian camp. The proactive state represents a competing kingdom opposed to God's kingdom, rewarding those whom it considers "good" (i.e., violators of God's commands) and punishing those whom it considers "evil" (i.e., Christians). Furthermore, libertarian Christians (see <http://www.LibertarianChristians.org>) will tend to *not* be postmillennial; viewing pluralism as a permanent state of affairs until Christ returns (i.e., always more "tares" than "wheat"; Matthew 13:24-43).

So how does one's public policy theology work itself out in terms of political activism? In reality, the two camps have much in common and they are able to combat common foes quite well. Both sides take an active role in transforming their world. Both hate socialism, state-sponsored perversion of morality and justice, economic intervention and regulation of business, licensing, etc. Their relatively minor differences appear when considering how to deal with problems and policies such as illegal immigration, drugs (to a lesser extent), and posting the Ten Commandments. In other words, while libertarians have no social policy, those in the Constitution Party camp have room for a little of it—as their platform indicates.